

Dissertation Defense

Emilia Peytcheva

Thursday, August 14, 2008

9:00AM

368 ISR and 1208 LeFrak

LANGUAGE OF ADMINISTRATION AS A SOURCE OF MEASUREMENT ERROR: IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVEYS OF IMMIGRANTS AND CROSS-CULTURAL SURVEY RESEARCH

U.S. surveys of minorities and immigrants allow respondents to answer in the language of their choice; however, the extent to which the language of survey administration may affect survey responding remains unknown. Psychological and psycholinguistic research demonstrates that the language of administration may influence responses through its impact on various cognitive processes and through the cultural frame that a language brings to the conversational context. This dissertation examines the extent to which language of administration affects bilingual bicultural respondents' answers to survey questions. It consists of three related parts. The first proposes a framework for possible language influences at each step of the response formation process, based on findings from psycholinguistics and cross-cultural psychology. Speculations on how the presented findings may impact survey data are offered. The second part is a study that examines the existence of language effects in observational data from the New Immigrant Survey. The confounding effects of respondent self-selection into a language of interview are overcome through the use of propensity score methods. Two groups of questions are considered – question in which language effects are expected to be the strongest because of differential social desirability associated with the Hispanic and American cultures (e.g., mental and physical health, alcohol use), and questions related to highly accessible and well defined facts, where no language influences are anticipated (e.g., marital status, living arrangements, number of biological children). The last part presents analyses of an experimental assignment of Spanish-English bilingual respondents to language of survey administration in the National Latino and Asian American Study, comparing questions on similar topics as the ones examined in the observational study.

Overall, the empirical investigation found limited support for language influences in surveys. Significant differences between language groups were found in questions related to alcohol consumption and family pride. Surprisingly, language influences were also found in reports of number of biological children. However, no language effects were detected in questions related to physical and mental health, family cohesion and family conflict. Various factors may explain the absence of strong and consistent language effects in this investigation – acculturation, level of bilingualism of the samples and unobservable factors not accounted in the propensity models are the most obvious. The existence of some language effects however requires further investigation of the conditions and mechanisms that produce them. It suggests that language can cue the interpretive frame bicultural bilingual respondents adopt. In turn, this implies that leaving the choice of language to the bilingual respondent (or interviewer) may not always be a good practice.